

The Secret of Cluster

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2007-07-13 08:03:21

Updated: 2007-10-11 09:29:09

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:52:24

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 9,623

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A single SPARTAN-II and two Marines are trapped in the middle of a Covenant invasion. With rescue far off, will they survive long enough to warn the other Colonies of the advancing Covenant armada?

1. Chapter 1

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The Secret of Cluster

Chapter 1

****1157 hours, April 14, 2547 (Military Calendar)/
> **Camp Refuge, UNSC Outer Colony, Planet Cluster****

The bunker was shaken violently from yet another mortar round. Within, amidst the cracked concrete and spent shell casings, stood three of the UNSC's finest soldiers. Sergeant Major Christopher Jennings, his bald head glistening with sweat, supported himself on one of two Titanium-A slabs that had been used as both a shield and a plug for a massive hole in the side of the bunker. Corporal James Waters nursed a sizeable gash on his shin with shaking hands, entering the first stages of shock. But the other, who towered over the two by a head-and-a-half was Adam-102, one of the legendary SPARTAN-II super-soldiers. He stood, unfazed by the surrounding explosions, assessing the situation. Nearly half a ton in his well-worn MJOLNIR armor, he was a reassuring pillar of support for the other two.

"Ammo count?" the Spartan turned to the Sergeant.

"Not much," the Sergeant rubbed his neck nervously. "About two clips of Armor Piercing rounds for the Assault Rifles. Half a clip of pistol ammo. Fourteen eight gauge magnum slugs, not that they'll do us much good at this range. And three SPNKR missiles."

"What about those LOTUS mines?" Waters said, rolling his pants back over his leg. Waters, even in his current state of shock, was calm. The shaking hands weren't nerves. He was one of the Elite Orbital Drop Shock Troopers (ODST), steeled against the hopeless odds they were now facing. Something as simple as shock couldn't affect him. Rather, his hands were shaking in anticipation. Being that he was trained for action, patience was never his forte. He wanted to bring the fight to the enemy, an admirable quality, but a dangerous one.

"Those will only kill so many," Adam replied. "Besides, they have to be in range, and it appears they are intent on keeping their distance from us."

"I guess," Waters laughed, "they finally learned to never fuck with a pissed off Spartan, huh?"

Though Adam was never keen on the kind of language used by the ODSTs, he couldn't help but share his sentiments. The Covenant had definitely learned to never get into close combat when Spartans were involved.

Another mortar round impacted, and melted a gaping two meter wide hole in the bunker's hardened steel dome. Droplets of rapidly cooling steel pinged off of metal and concrete surfaces, and the overpressure of the impact knocked Jennings and Waters flat. Adam stumbled, but crouched to retain his footing. The Covenant's aim was definitely improving, and the next shot would likely enter through the fresh hole, and detonate inside the bunker. Even a Spartan could not survive such a direct attack.

"Are you two okay?" Adam asked.

The Sergeant stood, a slight trickle of blood oozing from his ear, and patted Waters on the shoulder. "We're both fine," he said, "So what's the plan?"

Adam walked over to the empty shotgun on the ground, and recovered a handful of shells. He slid one into the shotgun's receiver, and cocking it, said, "We're taking the fight to them."

Two motionless figures crouched in thick jungle foliage. Beyond them lay a passage through a shallow crevice, so several fully armored soldiers could stand abreast. Up ahead, a third figure moved silently through the brush, stopped, and made several hand gestures, telling the other two to wait for the signal. The signal, of course, was the triplet explosions of three LOTUS anti-Tank mines. The trap was set, and the kill zone was prepared.

Adam emerged onto the path, brandishing a Covenant Plasma Rifle in one hand, and a Plasma Pistol in the other. Weapons pilfered off the bodies of a Covenant Grunt patrol unlucky enough to get in Adam's way. He paused momentarily to consider the weapons he held. They seemed strange, not just because of the shape and ammunition. The

UNSC's weapons were easy to understand. Simple mechanics in a compact package, designed to throw as much hot metal and fire in the direction of the enemy as physically possible. The Covenant weapons were, to a certain extent, disposable. Once the power core was depleted, the weapon was often simply abandoned and never recovered. It seemed a waste of room and a waste of resources for a species that was so methodical.

Adam cleared his mind of his thoughts and focused on the upcoming attack. The goal: decimate the Elite presence on the ground, causing the other species to panic and, hopefully, leave them alone long enough to escape. It wouldn't be long until the Covenant found what they were looking for and glassed the planet from orbit.

The sharp staccato fire of an Assault Rifle echoed through the crevice, and Adam retreated back into the tree line. A patrol had tripped a line that was rigged to fire two Assault Rifles until they were empty. They weren't meant to do damage, as much as they were meant to get the attention of the Elite's rear guard. When they walked into the crevice, they would get a nasty surprise.

A group of two red Elite Majors and three blue Elite Privates rounded a bend in the crevice and walked right into the second trap. The forward Elite tripped on the wire, and set off half a dozen primed grenades. The concussive force and flying shrapnel overloaded four of the Elite's personal energy shields and tore the aliens to ribbons. They all collapsed, but one Elite, missing skin and armor on one half of his body, staggered to his feet and searched frantically for an enemy to return fire to. From the tree line, and fist-sized rock hurled toward the Elite, and crushed his skull.

That should get their attention, Adam thought to himself. He waited patiently, crouched in the bush, invisible to the untrained eye. He checked the power left in his two weapons. The Plasma Pistol had enough energy for a single charged shot, and the Plasma Rifle was down to 10 per cent. Adam also felt around his belt for the two plasma grenades he had taken. He wished he could risk exposure to police the weapons from the fallen Elites. In all likelihood, the ones they carried had never been fired, and so would have a full charge. But Adam could already hear the stampeding footsteps along the trail, and knew better than to let his guard down. Besides, if everything went according to plan, he wouldn't even need to fire a single shot.

A single black-clad Special Forces Elite rounded the corner, brandishing a glowing energy sword and shouting a war cry. He was followed by a dozen more, then twenty, and when Adam counted thirty, he tapped the detonator on his gauntlet. The first of the LOTUS mines exploded down the trail in a hell storm of molten metal and fire. All thirty Elites stopped in their tracks and turned toward the source of the explosion. They started back the way they came, and Adam hit another detonator. The second LOTUS mine went off, tearing two dozen of the Elites to pieces. The overpressure caused by the mines also triggered the fuses on several of the Elite's plasma grenades, creating even more havoc with secondary explosions.

Adam waited to detonate the third mine. He could faintly hear voices and scattered plasma fire coming from down the trail. Slowly, the stampeding footsteps approached, becoming near-deafening as they grew closer. But as five dozen elites rounded the corner into Adam's field

of vision, they stopped, and winced in horror. Thirty Elites lay before them, or rather, what would constitute thirty Elites. A huge swath of the path had been charred, and small pools of solidified glass lay where the plasma grenades had detonated. The leader of the group, and Elite in the gold armor of a Ship Master, dropped his plasma rifle, and drew two Plasma Swords. His jaw mandibles spread wide, and he shouted a cry for vengeance and blood. The rest of the Elites followed suit, and followed their commander right into the path of the final LOTUS mine. It detonated, and half the Elites were immediately cut down, including the Ship Master. But the remaining Elites continued, unfazed, down the path, thirsty for blood.

When the last Elite had disappeared into the distance, Adam counted to sixty, and motioned for the others to form up. Silently, Jennings and Waters moved forward. They fell in behind the nearly invisible Spartan. Jennings let out a low whistle, alerting Adam to their presence. Adam, with a series of quick hand signals, ordered them to stay in the dark, and follow fifteen meters behind him. He gave the "go" signal, and they moved.

After picking up two fresh weapons, including one of the senior Elite's energy blades, Adam made his approach to the Elite encampment, being careful to always note the positions of the two noncoms. If they got into an unexpected firefight, he wanted to be sure that the two soldiers would be able to escape, and hopefully get the word out to the inward colonies, warning them of the Covenant's rapid approach. Ever since Adam had been assigned to remain on station at Camp Refuge five years before, he had been kept out of action. It seemed strange to just keep a Spartan around for the hell of it, so he doubled up his training, not just staying alert and fit, but actually improving his already impressive abilities. He had increased his speed, thinking he would even be a match for the lightning fast Kelly, and although it was nearly unnoticeable when in his MJOLNIR armor, Adam also increased his strength. He had trained himself extensively on every weapon available, and even on some nearly-depleted samples of Covenant weaponry. And so, while some other soldiers had grown soft, Adam was prepared when the Covenant finally arrived.

Adam stopped at the opening to a massive clearing, and nearly stumbled at the sight of thousands of Covenant warriors occupying the space that had been recently evacuated by the Elites. Diminutive Grunts, Vulture-like Jackals, and the bipedal behemoth Hunters squatted in trenches, talking amongst themselves, enjoying the brief reprieve from the harsh orders of their commanders. A group of Grunts were busy wrestling with a rival group of Jackals, barking and squawking in indecipherable tongues. A minor distraction that Adam hoped to take advantage of.

The Spartan retreated back to the other two soldiers, and gave them another series of sharp, concise hand gestures, ordering them to stay close, stay low, and stay quiet. Adam figured that they would have only a few rough patches of cover between them and a squadron of parked Phantom drop ships. IF they could reach one and manage to disable the pilot without a lot of noise, they could slip away unnoticed long enough to link up with a UNSC ship. There were far too many variables for Adam's liking, but there was little time remaining. Since they had left the bunker, the energy mortars had stopped firing. Something about that didn't sit right with him, but he didn't have the luxury of waiting to see how things panned out. A

few more hours, and the entire planet could be glassed.

The three soldiers approached the tree line of the clearing. Adam stepped up the magnification on his MJOLNIR suit's visor, and saw half a dozen sniper towers, each with two Jackals looking in different directions, collectively giving them a 360 degree field of vision. Too long out of cover, and the Jackal's would spot them, and their stealth would be ruined. Worse yet, those Jackals were notoriously good snipers, so Adam may well never know if he had been spotted or not before he died.

Another problem came from the two wounded soldiers in tow. Water's had received a large wound on his leg, giving him a slight limp that would be more noticeable when they started to move. While Jennings only had superficial wounds, he was an older man, not necessarily capable of the speed required for the upcoming operation. Although they were fine soldiers in their own right, they were no Spartans. Adam hadn't had the time to get acquainted with the abilities of those now under his command, and had no idea what they could and couldn't do. When Adam was still a member of Green Team, he was part of a flawless, cohesive unit, able to inflict maximum damage while taking on few - if any - casualties. Every Spartan more or less fended for themselves, no necessarily needing anyone to watch their back. But with ordinary humans, they had to be protected.

Adam shook his head clear, and moved along the tree line in a crouch. He watched as the Covenant unloaded large blue-purple crates from drop ships, and transport them to the center of the encampment. One of the feuding Jackals accidentally bumped into a Hunter, and was a moment later crushed under a massive boot. The Hunter uttered a subsonic growl at the warring groups, who quickly scattered and returned to their duties.

The Covenant seemed to fall into somewhat disorderly activity when the Elite's weren't around to give orders. Those who already had assignments seemed to continue without letup, while those who didn't were content to lounge around or squabble with the other species, lowering their state of alertness to nearly nonexistent. It seemed the only ones with any vigilance were the Jackal snipers in the towers. They peered into the distance, their amazingly good eyesight magnified from the scopes on their rifles. The more they moved, the more Adam felt their piercing gaze pass him by only a few centimeters. It took all his strength to not fire the first shot and take the snipers down.

After only a few minutes of slow, deliberate advancement, Adam and the two soldiers stopped behind an outcropping of boulders to rest. Waters needed to replace the blood-soaked gauze covering his wound. They were thankfully down-wind of all the Jackals, who also had excellent sense of smell. There was no doubt in any of their minds that they could be smelt just as easily as they could be seen. When the gauze had been replaced, they double-checked their ammunition. Adam relieved Jennings of his SPNKR rocket launcher and three rockets, giving him a plasma pistol and a Magnum instead. The man was becoming exhausted, and therefore less stealthy as they trekked onward. Less weight to burden him would, in turn, make him quieter.

When everything checked out okay, they continued on. After another few minutes of crouch-walking, they came upon open ground, about

fifty meters of cleared vegetation. This was a big problem. Their luck was slowly running out, and an unsheltered sprint across open ground? The idea of a sniper alley came to mind. Adam had to make a distraction, bring the Covenant's attention toward some space within the camp.

Adam thought for a second, and then came up with a foolish plan. But at the moment, there was simply no other way. He removed two fragmentation grenades, and strapped them together with surgical tape from the med kit. He pulled the pins, and hefted the twin explosives as far into the camp as he could. They had a five second fuse, so Adam counted to three, and blindly ran for the opposite tree line. He was half-way across the clearing when the grenades detonated. The entire camp erupted into mass confusion. Superheated Plasma and purple Needles fired in the direction of the explosion, killing a few of the unfortunate Covenant soldiers in the way. The subsonic rumbling indicative of a few dozen pissed off Hunters rattled Adam's bones, and with that, the fire ceased. Adam had made it to the other side without being spotted, and turned to check on the other two. He cursed under his breath.

Waters and Jennings still crouched at the opposite end of the clearing. He hadn't thought of the fact that humans couldn't sprint anywhere near as fast as Spartans. There was no way they could make it across the clearing in time. And now another problem was upon them. That last maneuver alerted the Covenant to their presence. Sweep teams were quickly organized, and they began fanning out in search of their assailants. Adam could see the two making hand gestures to each other, and then saw a "go" signal. He braced for another quick sprint. He eyed the nearest patrol, and when they weren't looking, he burst from his hiding place, running at full speed to the opposite side.

Halfway across the clearing, Adam could clearly see Waters pull the pins off two grenades, and lob them into the camp. When Adam did it, it was simply foolish. THIS was suicide. The Covenant were now on alert, and would no doubt notice the trajectory of the grenades. There would be no way to survive the ensuing onslaught of plasma bolts and needle shards.

The grenades detonated, this time much closer to the tree line. A group of Jackals were torn to shreds by the shrapnel, and they collapsed into puddles of their own blood. Adam's assumption was right. The Covenant most certainly noticed the attack. All Adam saw was a slight movement in the bush, and a blistering rush of projectiles burning the trees and dry grass to cinders. He stopped suddenly, and dropped to his stomach, making as small a target as possible. The motion was more training than anything else. Not only were the Covenant LOOKING for him, but with the SPNKR launcher strapped to his back, he was very noticeable. He slowly rotated, and when he faced the direction he had just come from, he bolted again.

Adam made it to the tree line, and, strangely, no shots were fired in his direction. Not a single one. He increased his visor's magnification, and scanned the encampment. It seemed all the Covenant were moving out, heading toward a site where they had begun an excavation project as soon as they arrived. Adam increased the range on his radar to encompass the entire camp, and got no reading. The Covenant had completely abandoned the site, leaving weapons, crates,

methane tanks for the Grunt's environmental suits, and any vehicle slower than a Ghost behind. They just up and left.

Three clicks on his radio, and Adam received the "form up" signal from someone on the far side of the camp. Not foolish enough to cross enemy territory, he carefully made his way around the camp in the cover of the bush. When he arrived at the source of the signal, he was shocked at the sight of Waters and Jennings resting against the trees. They looked at him, and they all shared a light chuckle.

"Well I'll be damned," Jennings said. "We thought you'd be toasted by those Covie bastards for sure."

"Like I said before," Waters added, "they know not to get into ground engagements against Spartans. I mean, they're dumb, not suicidal."

"Speaking of suicidal," Adam cut in, "what the hell were you two thinking with that grenade trick? You could have been vaporized."

Jennings stood, and hefted a confiscated Fuel Rod Cannon, the Covenant equivalent of a Rocket Launcher. "The way I see it," he said, "we could have either sat there and waited for death to come for us, or we could do something about our situation. Ten more seconds, and those Jackal's would have been all over us. We at least had a shot at dodging from long range. We would have been smoked at point blank."

Adam shrugged, a difficult maneuver in his movement-exaggerating armor. He couldn't argue with them. In retrospect, they made all the right moves, given the situation. It didn't matter that their actions would have been futile, what mattered is that they were still trying to survive, despite impossible odds. Adam was beginning to think that these men might not be all that different from him and his Spartan brothers.

"Okay, so what's the situation?" Adam asked.

"Well," Jennings said, patting the Fuel Rod Cannon, "we have three of these little beauties. We have two dozen plasma grenades, and we also pilfered three captured Assault Rifles with twelve clips for each."

"That, and I finally found some biofoam for my leg," Waters added. "I'll be able to walk just fine."

Adam smiled to himself. Where hopelessness had once resided, he now felt a rush of confidence. Though it would be difficult, there was the very real possibility that they may all survive the Covenant invasion on Cluster. It may be a long shot, but with Spartans and a few motivated Marines, anything was possible.

"So, what's the plan then?" Water's piped up.

Adam walked over to one of the Fuel Rod Cannons, and replaced the Rocket Launcher on his back with it. He also picked up an Assault Rifle, a dozen clips, and loaded the weapon. He cycled the action, and turned, saying, "The plan hasn't changed. We're going to go to

that excavation site, and find out what they were looking for. After that, we're going to kick as much Covenant ass as possible."

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

**1226 hours, April 14, 2547 (Military Calendar)/
> **Covenant Excavation site on Planet Cluster, UNSC Outer Colony**

Adam pressed himself against a large boulder near a gaping crater in the ground. Thousands of Grunts in power suits hefted human-sized boulders out of the center of the hole. Adam pointed a scope at the opposite ridge of the crater, and determined that it had to be at least three kilometers across. He then pointed the scope at the center, and determined again that it was a kilometer and a half deep. It appeared that all the Covenant currently occupying the planet had convened at this one site. So whatever they were looking for, they were most likely about to find it.

That didn't give Adam and his team much time. Somehow, they had to get to that central area unnoticed, find out what it was the Covenant were looking for, and retrieve it before they had a chance to. Then, with that in hand, get off the planet and link up with a UNSC battle group that, for all they know, wasn't even there anymore.

Not a problem.

The plan was conveyed to the other two soldiers, and they seemed to fully accept it.

"Hell," Jennings said, "I've lived a long life. All I want to do before I die is take a couple of those bastards down with me. Looks like today is my lucky day."

"As good a death as any Helljumper could ask for." Waters said, and cocked his shotgun approvingly.

"We need to go to radio silence for this mission." Adam said. "With all those Covenant down there, I don't want to risk them zeroing in on our location, or, worse yet, finding out our plan."

They nodded their approval, and Adam drew a rough plan into the dirt. They would silently commandeer a Wraith tank near the rim of the crater, and pilot it to the central area. From there, they would park the tank somewhere out of sight, and slip into the site silently.

Adam stopped drawing suddenly. _What the hell are we supposed to do after that?_ he thought to himself. They had almost no intel, and what little they had, was not reliable. For all he knew, the Covenant were planting a massive explosive to destroy the planet entirely. If that were the case, Adam and his team would want to be as physically far away from that crater as possible.

The Spartan shook his head violently. He was over thinking the situation. The important thing was to find what the Covenant were doing. Every other point was moot.

"When we reach this point," Adam said, tapping the center of the drawing, "we will gather intelligence and determine what our next course of action should be."

Waters and Jennings gave him the "good to go" thumbs up sign, showing their approval. They showed unwavering confidence in their leader. These men were more than willing to follow the Spartan into the gates of hell, and showed no fear. For Adam, their faith more than made up for the insurmountable odds they were now facing.

Adam gave the "go" signal and they moved out.

Four dozen bulbous Wraith tanks sat in orderly rows near the rim of the crater. They were more than a match for the Scorpion tanks used by the UNSC. Instead of firing a 130 mm round of packed explosives and copper casings, these behemoths hefted a plasma mortar, the very same kind that had assaulted the bunker just hours before. These tanks stood about a meter taller than a Scorpion tank when powered down, but when they were in use, the anti-gravity pods underneath lifted them an additional meter off the ground. They were big. They were powerful. But they had one crucial flaw: because the plasma traveled in a rough arc, they were notoriously hard to aim. Therefore, even if they were discovered, the Covenant could not bring down any heavy firepower on them immediately. The first break in days.

Adam and the others crept slowly toward the rear of the formation. Up ahead, three Grunts and two Jackals watched the commotion at the center of the dig. They were distracted. Easy targets. Adam approached the rear-most Jackal, grabbed its head, and twisted. Its neck made a sickly crack, and it fell to the ground silently. Waters and Jennings each picked a Grunt, and repeated the process. When they had finished, Adam had already dispatched the other two. No shots fired. No alarm was raised. No one was any the wiser.

Remaining very silent, Adam and his team climbed into the Wraith. The vehicle was meant to have only one occupant, and so it was a very tight fit. But they managed, and Adam took the control seat. He booted up the intrusion software in his armor, and the strange alien symbols that scrolled across the control panel were translated into simple commands: directional controls, turret trajectory, and a large flashing "fire" button. Adam powered on the anti-grav units under the Wraith, and it lifted into the air. It was unstable for a moment, but he made the necessary adjustments, and the tank righted itself. He pushed a glowing holographic joystick forward, and the tank lurched into movement.

Another design flaw became apparent when the tank started to move: it was painfully slow. At full speed, it only moved at a swift walking pace. At the rate they were currently moving, it would take an hour or more to reach the center. But Adam didn't dare activate the "boost" function, lest they be discovered.

After thirty minutes of slow, uneventful advancement, a message scrolled across the control panel: _Wraith pilot. Identify yourself immediately, and state your business._

This was a problem. Adam was not trained in the proper response to such a request. He hesitated, and then used his suit's translation software to wire a response: _I am needed at the center of the dig_.

A moment later, the first message was again sent, only this time, the words_ or be destroyed_ were added. Adam hadn't had time to send a response, when a video screen popped up above the control panel, where an Elite in red armor stared into Adam's visor. The Elite stepped back, and spoke in his native, warbling tongue. The video screen blanked, and a second later, the Audio Translation software in Adam's suit translated the Elite's words. Adam held his breath, as a gargling, rasping voice declared, "_A Demon is in our Midst, brothers!_" Then, as if of one mind, the already patrolling Wraiths turned, and fired on Adam's position. The blaring light of the mortar rounds replaced the light of the setting sun, and Adam winced in anticipation.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

****1202 hours, April 14 2547 (Military Calendar)/**
> **Aboard UNSC Prowler _Odin_, Near Planet Cluster**

The halogen lights fixed on the bridge glared harshly off the polished view screen. Corporal James Wallace sat at his station, monitoring the power being distributed among the Prowler-class vessel's many systems. Sensors, engines and the smallest Magnetic Accelerator Cannon in the UNSC fleet were all, at the moment, deprived of energy. The secret to a Prowler's stealth is it's dampened heat signature as much as it is it's radar ablative surface plates. Running unnecessary systems would only serve to alert the Covenant to their position. And a whole fleet of Prowlers were still no match for the mass of ships encircling the planet.

"Wallace, report," Captain Steven Price sighed from his position at the helm.

Wallace flinched, taking himself out of his trance. "Sir?"

"How is our heat signature looking?"

"Sir, we've matched the background temperature of the surrounding space. We're still completely invisible."

Price stood and rubbed his eyes. His actions echoed the sentiments of all the crew. They had all been at their stations for the last forty-eight hours, making sure the Covenant didn't spot them. By the last count, there were Seventy Covenant capitol ships in a rough orbit around Planet Cluster. Out of the 120 UNSC ships that were in place around the planet, only twelve were able to escape the slaughter, closely pursued by three Covenant ships each. They were as good as dead. Price only hoped they could take some of the bastards out with them.

But it was strange. The Covenant had yet to bombard the planet with Energy Projectors â€" an act colloquially known as "glassing" the

planet. Though the planet was still technically inhabitable, it was no doubt overrun by ground forces. But there was still hope, albeit a slight one.

"Are there any transmissions from the surface?" the Captain asked.

"No sir," a crewman responded. "It's all quiet down there. What are you looking for, anyway?"

Price ignored the question, and gazed at the planet that filled the forward view screen. The luscious green orb was close, yet, through the swarm of Covenant ships, also seemed far away.

"Sir, I've got something on the UNSC E-band," one crewman said.

Startled, Price responded, "What is it?"

"Sir, it's heavily encrypted. I'll need a moment to decode... There! It's done."

"Put it on the forward screen."

Cluster disappeared, and was replaced by a wash of static. Then every crewman tensed as a massive, Green-clad warrior appeared in a heavily damaged bunker. Behind him, a Corporal and a Sergeant braced themselves on a plate of Titanium-A cruiser armor. The warrior was stoic, and didn't flinch as an energy mortar detonated only a few meters away from the bunker.

"This is Spartan One-Oh-Two," the warrior said, "requesting assistance from any UNSC forces still near the besieged planet Cluster. The Covenant have begun to dig for something several kilometers from our current position at Camp New Hope. It is clear that they are searching for something at the site, and are likely close to finding it. If they do find whatever they are looking for, I fear humanity's chances for survival are bleak. The two soldiers behind me and myself will attempt to commandeer a vessel capable of traveling through vacuum, and link up with any UNSC forces still within range. Failing that, we will make our way to the dig site and find out what exactly the Covenant are looking for. This may be our only transmission. If no word is sent within seventy-two hours, consider the planet lost."

Another wash of static, and the Spartan disappeared.

The bridge crew continued to stare in awe at the blank screen. Then, almost as of one mind, returned to their stations.

Captain Price, however, knew the _Odin_ was the only vessel that could safely enter the system and lend any assistance. He also knew it would be pointless to go there without a battle plan. Though the ship was quiet and nearly invisible, under so many eyes, they lost their advantage. They would be nothing but a cloud of molten debris in seconds. But remaining where they were would help no one.

"Wallace," the Captain said, almost under his breath.

"Yes, sir?" Wallace responded.

"I want you to bring just enough power to the Cryo Suite to wake up the occupants."

"Sir, are you sure thats a go-"

"Don't question me, son. Just do it."

"Yes, sir." Wallace turned to his station and routed power to the Cryo Suite.

The entire bridge crew was suddenly abuzz with renewed vigor as they discerned the Captain's plan. They would need to work quickly if they were to awaken the "cargo" in time to do any good.

The Captain, however, only felt more fatigue, as the reality of his decision sank in. If his plan worked, he'd be condemning a dozen soldiers to a horrible fate. But on the other hand, if his plan didn't work, it wouldn't matter. They'd all be dead anyway.

And so the choice was clear.

"Send the technicians to the Cryo Suite," the Captain ordered. "I want those Spartans ready to fight."

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

****1250 hours, April 14, 2547 (Military Calendar)****

****Cryo Suite aboard UNSC Prowler _Odin_****

Crewmen and technicians rushed in and out of the Cryo Suite. Soon, twelve Spartans would need to be awoken for what could only be described as an "act of desperation." Captain Price gave specific orders: have the Spartans armed, armored, and ready for deployment by 1400 hours.

The Cryo Suite itself was unnecessarily cavernous for a ship that demanded ergonomic design. The two rows of cryogenic pods lined a partition that ran the length of the Suite. Stationed at each pod was a medical officer and two technicians. Above each pod was a monitor, predominantly displaying a timer, counting down until the locking pins would be detonated, and the covers would open.

One by one, the timers buzzed, followed by the sharp metallic clink of four locking pins blowing in unison. Starting at one end of both rows, the covers for the pods slowly lifted, each revealing one of the near-mythic Spartans.

There was a general confusion amongst the crew tending the Spartans. As they each slowly regained consciousness, it became apparent that these were no ordinary Spartans. Given the long line campaign they had been involved in, each one would be easily forty years old. However, these Spartans appeared to be children, no older than twelve or thirteen.

Another striking difference was revealed when the armor was applied to the soldiers. With the original MJOLNIR design, the Spartans were easily recognized by the gleaming green plates. The armor applied to these Spartans, though, seemed to constantly fluctuate, making it difficult to focus on them at a distance. This armor utilized a form of camouflage unlike anything else in the UNSC arsenal.

In a short thirty minutes, the Spartans had been awoken, armored, and analyzed regarding their combat readiness. Heart rate, basic reflexes and basic psychological stability were all tested. Every statistic was optimum; they were ready.

A door at one end of the Suite slid open, and Captain Price strode in. Noticing this, one Spartan shouted, "Captain on deck!"

The present crew and the Spartans lined up and stood at attention. Price paced the floor, inspecting his cargo.

"You are the Spartans assigned to the UNSC Prowler Odin, am I correct?"

In unison, the Spartans replied "Yes, sir!"

"You don't look like any Spartans I've ever seen." Price had trouble focusing on the warriors. Their camouflage hid them well. Even though they were right in front of him, he had difficulty seeing them clearly.

One Spartan stepped forward and said, "Sir, I am Spartan B-114. We are of the Spartan-III generation."

"A new generation, huh?" Price pondered this. The existence of additional Spartans would mean humanity still had a fighting chance.

"I have a mission for you all. Down on planet Cluster, the Covenant have amassed an army, and are digging. It is believed that they are looking for something." Price stopped pacing, and looked at the Spartan that had spoken a moment ago. "We cannot allow them to find it."

All the Spartan-IIIs stood straighter. They were rigid, awaiting their orders, and willing to die for the safety of the human race. Captain Price had only seen this once before, in an ancient documentary depicting the stand of 300 Greek warriors against one Million Persians. They fought valiantly to the last man, and even in death, they inspired all of Greece to rally against the invaders. These Spartans were no different.

"I have gotten word from a ground side Spartan-II and two Marines that the planet is already lost to Covenant ground forces. They will attempt to find out exactly what the Covenant are looking for, and will report back to me when they find more information. However, they will not make it by themselves. It is impossible, even for a Spartan-II to mount such an offensive. And so you will be inserted via Helljumper drop pods to the last known location of the Spartan. From there, you are to follow any tracks they left behind, and find them. After that, you will follow his orders. Is your mission clearly understood?"

Captain Price's words were again met with a resounding "Yes, sir!"

"Good," the Captain said, "as you were." He strode back out of the cryo suite, and back to the bridge.

The occupants of the Cryo Suite continued their labors; the technicians examining and applying armor, and the Spartans choosing their weapons. It was eerily silent, only the rhythmic taps and clanks of mechanical parts being disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled. Two Spartans ran combat drills in the corner, one wielding a combat knife, the other using a baton.

Across the room, two more Spartans picked through a box of spare parts for their sniper rifles. The S2 was a gas operated long range rifle firing a .50 caliber, discarding sabot round of depleted uranium. The rifles were designed to take huge amounts of abuse before jamming, and some of the parts, like the firing pin, could be replaced with parts from the standard issue sidearms. All designed to inflict the maximum amount of damage over the longest period of time possible.

The rest of the Spartans, when their armor was in good, working order, also began their tedious weapon selection. They all chose different primary weapons based on their role in the upcoming mission. Some hefted heavy rocket launchers and satchels filled with C-12 plastic explosive. One opted for a lock breaking kit and a shard of data crystal containing an intrusion AI. Most, however, chose the cut-down version of the standard MA5B, the MA5K. Though this assault rifle had less power, its ammo was readily available, and more compact, making it easier to carry more clips.

When all the Spartans had collected their gear, they lined up at the back of the Cryo Suite, awaiting further instructions from the team leader. One Spartan, Christopher, as he was known amongst his fellow Spartans, paced in front of them.

"We are about to go on a dangerous mission," Christopher said, remaining stoic. "We will be dropping in like the Helljumpers do. I think it's only fair to warn you that there will be no support during this mission. We are entirely on our own. However, if we contact the Spartan-II that is ground side, we will have a much better chance at survival."

Christopher stopped pacing, and faced his loyal team. They were all thoroughly unimpressive to the uninformed onlooker, but each Spartan was an army. They were trained from a very early age to show no fear on the battlefield. They were precision killers, dominating any battlefield they were dropped in to. But at the same time, they were his brothers and sisters. Christopher had grown up with them, and knew the ins and outs of their abilities. His team had no apparent weaknesses, but that was from a biased outlook.

Christopher drew a long breath, and told his team about the post-drop mission. They would be deployed a mile south of the bunker the Spartan-II made his transmission from. They were then to move north, and try to link up with the Spartan and his team. After that, they would try to find what the Covenant troops were looking for first, and steal a small craft of some kind and return to the _Odin._

After Christopher was done explaining the plan, he asked, "Are there any questions?"

The Cryo Suite was silent, as each Spartan-III gave the slightest shake of their heads. They all knew what was going to happen, and they also knew exactly what was at stake. The twelve of them were to face an innumerable army of blood thirsty aliens, and were expected to win. Yet they showed no fear. They couldn't. Fear was unknown to them, and therefore not a factor.

They were ready.

The smoldering remains of the Wraith still sizzled just a few feet away. Adam, Waters and Jennings crouched low to the ground, trying to bring their weapons to bear. They were all extremely lucky to be alive. Out of all the plasma mortars that were fired at them, only one made a direct impact. But it was enough to cripple the tank, and the main cannon was ruined. The three leaped from it just before the power core ruptured and exploded. But now they were out of cover, and completely surrounded.

Elites, Jackals and Grunts pressed in on all sides, only firing their weapons to keep their prey's heads down. Every few moments, Adam would toss a grenade into the mass, and scatter them. However, the ploy only worked as long as he had grenades to throw. After only a few tosses, he was completely dry, and resorted to firing his assault rifle. Waters and Jennings stayed behind him, scattering grunts and mowing down Jackals with their own weapons. But the enemy was quickly gaining ground.

When the Covenant troops were only five meters away, it seemed all the firing stopped. The Covenant wanted to savor their victory, and Adam and his team were out of ammo.

"Sir," Waters whispered, "what about the fuel rod cannons?"

"Save them," Adam responded. "We may need them in a minute."

The Covenant troops held a defensive circle around them, and stopped advancing. Adam tensed his muscles, reached into his rear satchel, and tossed something to the foremost Elite. The troops all rolled away, expecting a grenade. With a dull thud, a heavy stone struck the ground and bounced.

While the stone was still in the air, Adam emptied a fuel rod cannon's magazine into the group of reorienting troops. Caught off guard, they didn't stand a chance. The five shots impacted, and made a hole in the offensive ring. The human soldiers then made a break for the hole, firing at the shocked Covenant near them. All three continued to run, zig zagging until they reached a rocky outcropping. The return fire was thick by then, and filled the air with the heat and sizzle of superheated plasma.

"What now, sir? We're out of ammo." Waters said, still in his usually calm voice.

"Well," Adam said, "we have a slight advantage here. For one, the Covenant are too interested in their dig to send their full force."

We're only facing about a hundred of them. And since they all can't fit in here at once, they'll send in Elites in active camouflage to take us down quietly."

"Sir, how is that an advantage?"

"They don't know that we're expecting them."

The firing slowed, and extremely light footsteps could be heard drawing closer.

"Stay behind me," Adam said, gesturing for them to stay low as well.

A slight flicker on a nearby rock gave away the Elite's position. Adam wasted no time. He grabbed at the air, and caught the elite by his wrists. The camouflage deactivated, and revealed an Elite with dark purple armor. Adam could feel his hands slipping, and knew that this Elite also had personal shields.

Adam let go of one of the Elite's wrists just long enough to strike the aggressor in the chest. The shields flickered, the Elite lost it's footing, and was forced to step back. Adam followed up with three more blows, and the Elite's personal shields died. Regaining a handhold on the Elite's wrists, Adam turned them inward, and brought them up around the Elite's throat. He pressed them inward, and heard bones cracking. The Elite roared in pain, and gave a mighty push, shoving Adam back and freeing his wrists. Adam fell to the ground, and Waters stood above him, his shotgun leveled at the Elite's unshielded head. Waters pulled the trigger, and the Elite was thrown back against a rock, dead before he hit the ground.

Adam quickly rose to his feet, and looted the Elite's body. He found a fully charged plasma rifle, and a single beam energy sword. For a moment, the three soldiers stood and looked at each other, not saying a word. Adam then realized that, while the other two were no Spartans, he wouldn't trade them for any other soldier.

The moment was short lived, as the the rest of the surrounding Covenant decided the humans had become too much of a problem to be left alive. The thunderous sound of sprinting hoofs closed in on the outcropping, and the soldiers crouched in anticipation of their last stand. They could feel the hate of a thousand Covenant soldiers concentrated upon them, and the dirt on the ground began to move and vibrate. Adam looked at the moving earth, and knew it couldn't possibly be caused by the Covenant. Something else was happening.

As the Covenant grew closer, a crack started to form underneath Adam and the other two. They all seemed to sink as the ground gave way underneath all the vibrations. The crack grew larger, and spread across the entire clearing in the outcropping. "Brace yourselves!" Adam shouted, just as the earth underneath him and the two Marines gave way, and they dropped.

5. Chapter 5

IMPORTANT NOTE: Whenever the story follows the perspective of the Covenant, I will be using the Covenant names. For quick reference, these are the names of the Species in Covenant Speak:

Sangheili/Elites. Unngoy/Grunts. Kig-Yar/Jackals. Lekgolo/Hunters.
San 'Shyuum/Prophets. Huragok/Engineer.

****Ninth Age of Reclamation**

> ****Aboard the _Piercing Light_, Flagship of the fleet
Cleansing Crusade****

"How long must these humans resist us?" Uran 'Palmamee sighed as he placed his hands on the communications console. He had been the Fleet Master of the _Cleansing Crusade_ since they had begun their search for a mysterious 'holy relic.' It remained mysterious, only because the San 'Shyuum kept the nature of the relic secret from the Sangheili high council.

"Great one, there is a messenger from the ground side forces that wishes to speak with you." Uran turned to see the Ship Master, Uman Zerumee, on bent knee before him.

"Rise," Uran said. "In times like these, such pointless formalities are simply a waste of time."

"My apologies, Great one," Uman said as he rose to his feet. "There is a Major wishing to speak with you about some important development with the excavation."

"What is the nature of the development?"

"He wouldn't say. However, he did say it was urgent, and that he could only speak with you."

Uran again sighed deeply. "Very well. Send him to the Meeting Chamber. I will join him shortly."

"As you wish, Great one," Uman said, as he turned to a group of Unngoy that stood nearby. "Go to the docks, and inform Dam'no 'Terunee that he is to report to the Meeting Chamber."

The Unngoy all replied with a hasty "Yes, Mighty one," as they scurried off the Command deck to their new assignment. When they had left, Uman turned his attention back to the Fleet Master.

"What do you believe he has to say?"

"I cannot be sure, and it would be foolishness to venture a guess at this point. Such useless pondering only serves as an unnecessary distraction."

Uran brushed past the Ship Master, bumping him with his shoulder as he headed for the door. As it beeped and slid open, Uran grasped the door frame, and stopped. Turning his head slightly, he said, "And I do not believe it is wise for you to waste your time in such a way, either."

With that, Uran left the Command deck, and headed down the twisting corridors of the _Piercing Light_'s interior. It was only in passing that he could take in the wonders of the inner workings of the ship. The alloy that lined the walls, floor and ceiling were thin, but incredibly strong.

The alloy was also resistant to intense heat, making it the ideal

secondary armor against the humans high-density metal bolts that seemed to make up their warship's only form of artillery. The weapons were crude, inefficient, and to a high degree, ineffective. But when in high enough numbers, even the Piercing Light could not withstand a barrage of the humans cannons.

The passageways and many of the chambers also seemed unnecessarily cavernous. So much empty space made the Fleet Master nervous. He longed for the days when he was able to see the enemies that he was annihilating. His right hand tingled with delight as he remembered the way his energy blade felt, gripped in his hand as he slew humans and heretics alike. But now, the gold armor he wore that most Sangheili would feel was an honor to wear, felt to him, almost like a curse.

Uran turned a corner, and the doors to the Meeting chamber opened with a hiss. Within stood and unusually muscular Sangheili. His crimson armor, gleaming under the glow of the single overhead light, gave hint to his rank as a Major. As the Major turned, he quickly dropped to one knee and introduced himself: "Great One, I am Major Dam'no 'Terunee. I have an important matter I must discuss with you."

"Rise," Uran said. "Speak your words."

"Great One, I have a very important data crystal you must see."

Quickly, Dam'no strode to an unlit console on a far wall. As he approached, the console flickered to life, seeming almost to sense his presence, and react to it.

Dam'no slid the data crystal into a slot in the console, and a large, three dimensional video feed appeared in the center of the Meeting Chamber. The feed depicted a heavily vegetated, narrow trench. At one end was the impromptu encampment made by his forces, and the other was a severely battered human encampment.

"This is what you came all this way to show me?" Uran asked.

"Yes, Great One. Watch."

The video feed began to play. A patrol of Sangheili Minors were suddenly obliterated by several crude explosives. This caught the attention of the rest of the Sangheili within the camp, who then ran to investigate. Uran watched in horror as nearly a hundred of his warriors were cut down by even larger explosions. Only half a dozen survived, who continued along the narrow trench toward the human camp.

"Stop the video," Uran said, disgusted. "I've seen enough."

The video stopped, and then faded, as Dam'no removed the data crystal, and the console lights dimmed once again.

"What was the meaning of that?" Uran asked.

"That," Dam'no said, "Was the ambush and ensuing slaughter of all the Sangheili troops assigned to guard the camp. As of that moment, the only ones left on the whole planet are the ones assigned to guard the

dig site."

"What are you getting at, Major? You waste precious time with your talk."

"The humans responsible for the attack attempted to enter the dig site, but were spotted by our perimeter guards."

"I assume they got away. Otherwise, you wouldn't need to be here."

"Yes, Great one. As you surmised, they managed to escape. They were last seen at a rocky outcropping along the inner perimeter of the dig site."

Uran paced the floor. This was a sudden change. A group of humans were able to wipe out the majority of the Sangheili presence on the ground, and breeched the security ring around the dig site. With so few Sangheili commanders on the ground, the coherence of the ground side troops would quickly dissolve. More would need to be moved in.

"The solution is clear," Uran said. "We must send in a strike team to seek out and eliminate the humans. They must not find the artifact."

"Agreed, Great one," Dam'no replied. "However, may I make a suggestion as to the team's make up?"

Uran nodded.

"I suggest a group of Special Operations Sangheili, Unngoy Ultras, and at least a single pair of Elite Lekgolo."

Uran was shocked at the suggestion. "What is the purpose behind so many specialist warriors?" Uran questioned. "Any team will do."

"Normally, Great one, I would agree. However, these humans are led by something we have only recently encountered in their forces."

Dam'no jogged over to the console, and slid in another data crystal. Another video feed came into view. Within a cluster of rocks, two human soldiers crouched, their primitive weapons leveled. But there was a third.

This third was much larger, and encased in a green, reflective armor. As the video played, the green-clad human, leaped forward, and began to wrestle with a cloaked Sangheili warrior. In just a few seconds, the human's compatriot had killed the warrior. The green-clad human then looted the Sangheili warrior's body, took his weapons, and again crouched with the other two.

The video froze, then faded, as Dam'no removed the data crystal.

"Moments after this video was recorded," Dam'no said, "the ground underneath them gave way, and they all fell into the maze of corridors beneath. Until we access the layout of the facility from the core, we won't know where they are."

"How close are you to unearthing the core?" Uran asked.

"We are but hours away. I would wager that by the time I return to the site, it will already be unearthed. When we do, we will know exactly where the humans are located."

Dam'no drew a few paces closer to the Fleet Master.

"Great one, you are the only one with the authority to assemble such a powerful group of warriors. But it is essential that they are ready to be deployed when the humans are found."

Uran pondered this. He would need to scour the fleet's personnel in order to find the warriors Dam'no was requesting. But he was right. He was the only one with the authority to make such a request.

"Well, then," Uran said, with a sigh, "they shall all meet you at the center of the dig. However, you will accompany them in their search, as their newly promoted Commander."

Dam'no bowed his head. "I thank you, Great one," he said, as he knelt. "I will not disappoint you."

Uran left the Meeting Chamber, and found himself invigorated. The idea of a warrior worthy of such a powerful team of specialist troops reminded him of the first battle he took part in. He was to quell a heretic uprising on a lunar station near his home planet. He faced fierce warriors, all of which had experience far beyond his own. And yet, the thought of superior warriors did not frighten him; on the contrary, he found it exciting.

And so the idea of this human requiring such special attention â€" the feeling was amazing.

Uran strode on to the command deck of the Piercing Light, his head held high. As he entered, he handed the Sangheili at the communications console a data pad.

"I want you to hail the personnel commanders aboard all the remaining ships in the fleet," Uran said, "requesting they send us information on the types of troops listed there."

The Sangheili scrolled through the list, and gasped. "What could possibly warrant such a powerful team?"

Uran laughed, and collapsed into his seat at the center of the command deck.

"It's for a human," he said. "A single human."

End
file.